DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 222 842 CG 016 316

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TITLE The Effects of Racial Discrimination on the Social Reality Perceptions and Childrearing Patterns of Black Mothers.
PUB DATE 10 Oct 81
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Black Child Development Institute (11th, Washington, DC, October 10, 1981).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Measures; *Attribution Theory; Behavior Patterns; *Black Mothers; *Child Rearing; Communication (Thought Transfer; Locus of Control; *Parent Child Relationship; *Racial Discrimination; *Social Cognition
IDENTIFIERS *Blame

ABSTRACT

Social science perspectives on black maternal childrearing practices have traditionally ignored the cultural-historical, socio-political, and economic realities. Interviews were conducted with 62 black mothers to study their perceptions of racism and its effects on their childrearing practices. Results indicated that educational status alone did not account for most of the variations in childrearing patterns regarding racism. The mother's educational status combined with the racial characteristics of her educational environment acted as predictors of her perceptions of racism and the type of blame orientation she used. The findings suggest that mothers who perceive their own influence on social realities convey a sense of self-determination to their children. (JAC)

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THE EFFECTS OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION ON THE SOCIAL REALITY PERCEPTIONS AND CHILDREARING PATTERNS OF BLACK MOTHERS

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A paper presented at the 11th Annual Meeting of the
National Black Child Development Institute
Washington, D.C., October 10, 1981

CG 016316

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THE EFFECTS OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION ON THE SOCIAL REALITY PERCEPTIONS AND CHILDREARING PATTERNS OF BLACK MOTHERS

Introduction

Social science perspectives on Black maternal childrearing practices have traditionally emphasized differences in the mother's values, goals and behavioral processes as compared to those of white mothers. The perceptions of the sources of these differences vary widely, depending upon the point of view and assumptions of the observer. Three major assumptions characterize the bulk of this research: (1) that the societal environment, including its ideological and structural components, is a benign environment; (2) that equal opportunity exists and universal standards are applied equally for all individuals; and (3) that all members of our society share the same cultural background and history.

The social reality of Black people contradicts all these assumptions, and to the extent that social scientists have ignored or failed to perceive racism as a critical element in the cultural and experiential realities of Black people, our information about and understanding of Black behavior has been extremely limited and distorted. Dr. Lewis M. King (1980) describes a research model which argues that human interactions are influenced by four realities which are in continuous interaction. Social scientists have traditionally focused on the bio-psychological realities and ignored the cultural-historical, socio-political and economic realities.

One dimension of the socio-political reality was explored in the central

research questions in this study. This research examined: (1) How do Black mothers perceive racism? and (2) How do their perceptions of racism affect their childrearing patterns and practices?

Procedures

Perceptions of racism: blame orientation

Sixty-two Black mothers living in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area, each with at least one child age four or older, were interviewed. This paper presents only a part of a larger study which examined several socio-economic background, psychological and childrearing factors. The research was conducted in the mothers' own homes. The semi-structured interview schedule included a series of open-ended questions about the mothers' social backgrounds, concepts of racism, and their childrearing patterns with regard to racism. Each individual mother's responses were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Selected findings are reported for only one of the psychological factors and two of the childrearing patterns.

Part of the data collection process involved specific inquiries into the mothers' perceptions of what constitutes racism. This maternal conceptualization was captured by asking two specific questions. They were:

(1) "Two child psychiatrists have said, 'Being Black in this country full of anti-Black feelings and/or actions (racism) presents real problems.'" The respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with this statement, and to explain their positions.

(2) "Do you believe that there are limitations placed on Blacks in this country that are not placed on other groups?" Respondents were again asked to explain their "yes" or "no" response to the question.

Mothers' responses to these two questions were viewed as indicators of

their conceptualizations of racism; the questions were expected to elicit the mothers' perceptions of both individual and societal "limitations." Over ninety-five per cent of the mothers agreed with the statement on anti-Black feelings and/or actions, and believed that societal limitations existed for Blacks.

The categories I developed to code the mothers' responses to the "concept of racism" questions were based on four concepts which were taken from the literature: Rotter's (1966) Internal/External Control Scale, which was designed to measure the individual's concept of the extent to which she can exercise control over her own life chances (locus of control); William Ryan's (1971) "Blaming the Victim" analysis of blame orientation theory; Gurin and Epps' (1975) discussion and analysis of the special significance of "System-Blame" as an external control variable for Blacks; and William E. Cross's (1971) theory on the psychology and processes of Black liberation. These four conceptualizations relate to individual psychological orientation toward or feelings about the sources of control over one's life chances, or what I will now refer to as "blame orientation."

Traditional social scientists argue that the Rotter Internal/External Control Scale is an effective instrument for measuring an individual's perception of her ability to control her own destiny. High internal control scores are equated with a belief in one's own competence and ability to do what one sets out to do, regardless of external forces. High external control scores are equated with fatalism or "happenstance" and one's sense that her success or failure is a matter of luck or chance and/or is controlled by outside forces. These interpretations of the significance of such values are often proven inaccurate or inappropriate in our multicultural and racist society.

Gurin and Epps (1975) pointed to the fact that the Rotter Scale fails

to distinguish between personal values and expectancies. They argued that this omission in the Rotter Scale must be taken into account in discussing the external scores of Blacks--which are usually higher than those of whites. Given the social realities of Blacks in America, these external control values are not necessarily negative; for Blacks, in actuality, the social structure is indeed not benign, and individual control cannot be exercised in every situation.

Ryan's (1971) thesis in Blaming the Victim focused on the blame orientations reflected within our societal structures' responses to social problems. He argued that "blaming the victim" is an ideological process used to define social problems by ignoring a "whole set of factors that are usually considered relevant"--for instance, unequal distribution of income, social stratification, ethnic and racial group conflict, and inequality of power. The victim-blaming individual analyzes racial and/or social inequities by subscribing to the values, norms and mores of the dominant society which are based on the Protestant work ethic ideology and which posit that morality and hard work are equated with success (Gurin & Epps, 1975; Lewis, 1978). Believing that hard work, morality and competence are equated with reward, the victim-blaming individual attempts to cope with racism through the use of traditional modes of personal success and mobility. She values education and believes it will be rewarded equally--or "nearly" equally--regardless of color. Although she knows that a Black "has to be ten times better than a white to be equal," she strives to achieve in the conventional manner. Being tied to the individual achievement syndrome, she has but one contextual option for explaining the failures experienced by Black individuals or the group in general--the Protestant work ethic context, which ascribes failure to personal inadequacy, laziness, immorality, lack of perseverance, etc. On

the other hand, the system-blaming individual, who analyzes racial inequities from a systems analysis or societal structural point of view, has many more realistic and demonstrable options for explicating the reasons for the Black/white social reality differences which exist within the society.

Gurin and Epps (1975) argue that the system-blame analysis of racial inequities is a reflection of a healthy perspective on the external realities which do exist. The ability to recognize racism as an external obstacle which predictably affects one's life chances is hardly fatalistic. On the contrary, it suggests that one's psychological orientations toward self and group are not consonant with the stringently prescribed and effective distortions of reality which are created by racism. "Since racism does exist, awareness of it attests to a sense of reality" (Gurin & Epps, 1975, p. 95).

Cross (1971), in an analysis of the Black liberation process, helps us to further distinguish and support the significance of the differences between victim- and system-blame orientations in individuals. His analysis would locate the individual who subscribes to the victim-blame orientation in the first stage of the liberation process, or the "Preencounter" stage. This individual is:

> . . . programmed to view and think of the world as being non-Black, anti-Black, or the opposite of Black. . . . The sociological, political, cultural and psychological conditions that result from this world view appear to be the same for both lower- and middle-class Black people. The content of the Black experience within the class system differs but the context is similar, as both think, act and behave in a manner that degrades Blackness. Preencounter Negroes are politically naive and are programmed to believe in the Protestant ethic. (Cross, 1971, pp. 100-101)

Cross carries the individual through four other stages, concluding with the fifth and final stage--the "Internalization-Commitment" stage. The liberated Black individual is functioning from the perspective of a Black world view which includes a feeling of inner security and validation, and a state of "psychological Blackness." This individual, who is in the

"Internalization-Commitment" stage, is also actively involved in trying to change her community, and defines change in terms of the masses of Black people. These differences in psychological orientation have significant implications for and relationships to differences in behavioral (childrearing) patterns.

The four above concepts were used in the assessment of the individual's blame orientation and guided the coding and analysis procedures of this research. The mothers' blame orientations were derived from their responses to the two "concept of racism" questions. Mothers' responses to the statement in the first question ("Two child psychiatrists have said, 'Being Black in this country full of anti-Black feelings and/or actions presents real problems.'") fell into four major problem categories: (1) the absence or lack of control over life chances (powerlessness); (2) the absence of access to, quality, and/or opportunity in education; (3) the absence of economic opportunity, parity (in wages and credit), and resources; and (4) the absence of societal support in the socialization process (self/group-concept development, history, culture). The responses to the second question ("Do you believe that there are limitations placed on Blacks in this country that are not placed on other groups?") fell into four major limitation categories: (1) limitations in "everything" (health, family, history, culture, politics, economics, housing, education; for example, a mother said, "You can't make decisions about where you want to live, swim, go to school, etc."); (2) limitations in education (opportunity, quality, representation in public media); (3) economic limitations (income, credit, job options); and (4) the limitations which derive from negative white attitudes and behavior (for example, a mother said, "Because of color visibility, everyone has the right to go up and take a pot-shot at you and tell you you're Black and what

that means.").

Because the study used interview procedures, many mothers provided statements which applied to several of the conceptualization of racism categories. For example, one mother responded to the societal limitations question as follows:

> They (societal limitations) have to do with cultural awareness--genocide, education, self-pride. They try to destroy all our heroes and leaders by any means--death, drugs, wars, Black families, Black history, health, economically and politically. (Richardson, 1981, p. 157)

This response includes descriptions of all four of the major categories of response to the questions. Therefore, using content analysis procedures, each item was coded separately and included in the appropriate concept of racism category. The total of these eight categories was used to measure nominal values in a "Consciousness of Racism Index." The mothers' scores on the Consciousness of Racism Index were then divided into two levels, representing high or low consciousness of racism orientations. Mothers whose scores were between 6 and 8 were coded as having a <u>high</u> consciousness of racism level, and mothers whose scores were between 0 and 2 were coded as having a <u>low</u> consciousness of racism level (there were no scores in the middle).

Two groups of mothers resulted from the use of these procedures: a high consciousness of racism group and a low consciousness of racism group. Since the responses of the high consciousness of racism group principally reflected the use of a societal structural approach to the analysis of the sources of racial inequities, these mothers were defined as the "system-blame orientation" group. Conversely, the responses of the low consciousness of racism group principally reflected the use of an "individual as central" approach to the analysis of the sources of racial inequities, and these mothers were defined as the "victim-blame orientation" group.

The mother who uses a system-blame analysis observes the innumerable disparities between the social realities of Blacks and whites, and conceptualizes a "culture of inequality." She will view racism as an ideological and structural phenomenon which directs its energies toward maintaining the systemic oppression of Blacks while enhancing the advantages of whites (Blauner, 1972; Lewis, 1978; Hilliard, Jenkins & Scott, 1979). The mother who blames "the system" has what Gurin and Epps (1975) have described as a "clearly developed ideology of the social and economic causations" of racial inequities.

The mother who uses a victim-blame (individual/group/institution) analysis of racial inequities and oppression participates in her own oppression; although she (the victim) may well have had some experiences with or notions of institutional and/or individual injustices, she is basically bound to adhere to a victim-blame orientation in explaining her own--or others' or a specific institution's--"failures," using such reasoning as, "If I had stayed in school longer . . ." or, "If Black men would only support their families . . ." or, "If 'they' had given me that job . . ." etc.

There were trends in the results of the correlational analyses of the relationships between social background factors and blame orientations which I would like to share at this point. One of the most striking things was that the mothers viewed racism in these two distinctly different ways. That is, one group of mothers had a system-blame orientation (scoring 6 to 8 on the Consciousness of Racism Index) and the other group of mothers had a victim-blame orientation (scoring 0 to 2 on the Index). None of the study mothers received scores of 3, 4, or 5 on the scale; in other words, they either blamed the system or they blamed the individual.

The most interesting result of this analysis of blame orientation was the fact that the variable which separated these two groups of mothers was

the racial make-up of their early and later educational environments. Mothers who attended all or predominantly Black elementary and junior high schools and mixed or predominantly white high schools and colleges used a system-blame orientation in their analyses of racism, while mothers who had low educational status (high school or less) and mothers whose higher education was achieved in all or predominantly Black colleges used victim-blame orientations.

Initially, when I sought to determine that educational status would explain these differences, as traditional research has argued, and when I correlated high educational status with blame orientation, it appeared that indeed high educational status was the determining variable in blame orientation. However, when I controlled for the racial make-up, or cultural/racial characteristics, of the educational environments, it became quite clear that high levels of education attained in white institutions were associated with the system-blame orientation, while high levels of education attained in all or predominantly Black institutions (and low levels of education regardless of the racial make-up of the environment) were associated with the victim-blame orientation. The difference between the mothers with low educational status and the mothers who attained a high level of education in an all or predominantly Black institution was that the former perceived racism's effects on Blacks' life chances as reflected in the educational and economic institutions, while the latter believed that the effects of racism were reflected in the economic structure and in negative white attitudes and behavior.

Thus, the analysis of the social reality factor, as represented in racial characteristics of educational environment, led to a clearer delineation of the relationship between educational status and perceptions of racism. What emerged were two groups of mothers, based on their perceptions

of what was happening to them in this society.

Childrearing patterns

Next, in order to answer the second research question regarding how mothers' perceptions of racism affect their childrearing patterns, I used two sets of questions to measure the mothers' childrearing patterns. One set, consisting of open-ended questions, was related to how the mothers nurtured and supported their children with regard to racism; the second set, consisting of sentence completion questions, were used as indicators of the actual communication styles which the mothers used in responding to their children with regard to racism. The questions measuring nurturing and support were:

(1) "How have you helped your child/children to cope with racism?"

(2) "How have you helped your child/children to cope with the limitations that are placed on Blacks in this country?"

These questions were similar and resulted in nearly identical responses. Therefore, they were combined into one descriptive behavioral measure which elicited responses which fell into five modes of behavior: (1) "sharing/talking"--i.e., informing, educating (indirect verbalization of sentiments), or "sharing"--giving examples of and helping the child to recognize and cope with racism (direct verbalization of sentiments); (2) "mothering"--including nurturing, supporting, loving, praising, building self-esteem, being there; (3) "modeling"--coping, survival and change strategies, i.e., teaching and living it, finding solutions, being a resource, confronting racism; (4) "exposure/others"--external to self, such as books, television, environmental comparison trips to racially different areas, or "exposure/racism"--"experiencing it"; and (5) "provision of things"--money and/or prayer.

The second set of questions measured actual communication styles;

the questions and the respective categories of response were:

(1) "What would you say/do if your child asked why whites don't like Blacks?" Responses: (a) "ignorant"--they are ignorant, fearful, insecure, threatened by and/or have a need to feel superior to Blacks; (b) "racism"--prejudice and racism for the purpose of maintaining power and feelings of superiority; and (c) "history"--Black history and survival of Blacks in spite of it.

(2) "What would you say/do if your child said s/he didn't like Black people?" Responses: (a) "examine self"--role as mother, what she had or had not done; (b) "understanding"--exhibit understanding if the child was young and the question related to wanting certain advantages, or "reject"--if the child was an adolescent; (c) "instruct"--persuade about the advantages of being Black, or Black advantages and racism; and (d) "emotional"--hurt, cry, "die," be upset.

(3) "What would you say/do if your child asked why Blacks and whites are not treated the same?" Responses: (a) "racism/white control"--racist society, racism institutionalized, systemic nature; (b) "ignorance"--fear, prejudice, envy; (c) "threatened"--whites are threatened by Blacks because they fear Blacks are superior; and (d) "history"--of slavery.

System-blame and victim-blame mothers both responded to these questions. Their responses were coded in the appropriate childrearing pattern categories. Although the mothers often reported performing within several of these modalities, each mother tended to cluster her responses around particular modalities. When mothers did indeed respond within several modalities, the responses were coded into their appropriate childrearing pattern categories. This procedure was used for each of the two maternal groups. The system-blame group of mothers tended to be characterized by particular sets of

childrearing patterns, and the victim-blame mothers tended to be characterized by another set of childrearing patterns.

Results

Results of the analysis of covariance between mothers' blame orientations and the childrearing patterns they used to help their children cope with racism revealed some clear associations. Mothers who used the system-blame orientation relied on nurture and support styles which included four patterns of behavior: (1) "modeling," (2) "exposure/others," (3) "sharing," and (4) "mothering." They used communication styles which included three response patterns: (1) "racism" (taught), (2) "examination of self," and (3) "racism/white control."

Mothers who used the victim-blame orientation relied upon either one or two of the following five nurturing and support patterns: (1) "provision of things," (2) "sharing/talking," (3) "mothering," (4) "exposure/racism," and (5) "exposure/others." They used communication styles which included the following six response patterns: (1) "ignorant," (2) "instruct about Black advantages," (3) "exhibit understanding," (4) "emotional upset," (5) "threatened," and (6) "history." The experience of college in an all/predominantly Black educational environment was associated with the use of the "provision of things" and "exposure/others" nurturing and support styles, and with the "instruct about Black advantages" communication style. The experience of a high school education in a mixed/predominantly white environment was associated with the use of the "mothering" nurture and support style and with the "history of Blacks" communication style. The experience of high school in an all/predominantly Black educational institution was associated with the use of the "sharing/talking" and "exposure/racism"

nurturing and support styles, and with the "ignorant" and "threatened" communication styles. Low educational status, regardless of cultural/racial characteristics of educational environment, was associated with the "exhibit understanding" and "emotional upset" communication styles.

The system-blame mother communicates in a style that is system-blame oriented. The responses of "racism is taught" or "racism/white control" evolve from her conceptualization of the ideological and social structural qualities of racism which ascribes blame to the system. The implication of this orientation is that a racist societal structure is designed to create these inequities in social realities, and to distort the psychological orientations of individuals. However, systems can be changed--or at least the possibility of change is offered--and the child may in fact become an agent of change or get involved in change processes.

The communication styles of the victim-blame mothers, on the other hand, reflect their individualistic analyses of issues. They use a personalized approach in their explanations of inequities to the child. The characteristic attribution of ignorance, selfishness and/or greed to white people implies an inherent quality or genetic defect that cannot be corrected. Such responses may leave the child with a sense of hopelessness and/or ineffectiveness. In other words, the implication is that "it's in their (white people's) nature," and nothing short of genetic engineering or "God's wrath" can change the situation.

Finally, the difference between the victim-blame communication style of "exhibit understanding" as contrasted with the system-blame communication style of "examine myself," in response to the child's expression of dislike of Black people, implies certain significantly different psychological orientations. The victim-blame mother's response is suggestive of the non-

or anti-Black individual identity which was suggested in Cross's (1971) analysis of the "Preencounter" stage of Black liberation, and reflects the absence of a sense of a collective identity. The system-blame mother's behavior, on the other hand, reflects her own sense of maternal responsibility and the fear of some failure or "oversight" on her part which caused the child to have low self/group-esteem. She implies that she is concerned that the child does not recognize the collective part of her/his identity and becomes involved in the process of reviewing and analyzing her childrearing strategies to determine how and whether or not she has done all she believed she was doing to help her child to develop a strong personal and collective sense of self.

Summary and Implications

The results of this study suggest that educational status alone does not account for most of the variations in childrearing patterns regarding racism. Instead, it is the educational status of the mother in combination with the racial characteristics of her educational environment which act as the predictors of the mother's perceptions of racism and the type of blame orientation she uses in her analysis of the sources of racial inequities.

The psychological orientations of these mothers were in turn translated into and/or became the predictors of their childrearing patterns regarding racism. The experience of external environmental and cultural factors which pertained in the mixed/predominantly white college experience seems to have predisposed the mothers to use a system-blame orientation in their analyses of racial inequities and their childrearing patterns which were different from those of the mothers who had not had this experience and who were therefore predisposed to use a victim-blame analysis.

The overall implication of this study is conceptually clear and simple. The impact of the maternal experiences and social reality perceptions upon childrearing patterns is significant. To the extent that the mother perceives her social realities as responsive to and determined by her own efforts and energies, she will convey these perceptions and a sense of self-determination to her progeny. The socialization of the Black child in a racist society is an awesome, challenging and sometimes overwhelming responsibility. However, the use of a system-blame analysis in explicating the gross inequities which exist in this society and the discrepancies between Black and white realities helps the mother to provide more effectively the kinds of nurturing and support which a Black child needs if s/he is to comprehend and cope with racism without undergoing severe physical and/or psychological damage.

Traditional research has most frequently offered suggestions for change in Black mothers' childrearing techniques and patterns. However, as this study demonstrates, changes in childrearing patterns are not likely to occur, nor would they be effective, without the more significant change in the world view or psychological orientation of the mother. This research demonstrates that the psychological orientation of the mother is one of the most critical elements--if not the most critical element--in determining the quality of her childrearing patterns.

Racism and its endemic elements suggests an explanation of why the experience of college in a mixed or predominantly white environment seems to operate so as to bring about a "change" in the individual's blame orientation. The Black individual who has fulfilled the tenets of the Protestant ethic and has been exposed to the actual non-superiority of whites as a racial group continues to experience racial oppression. This contradiction would make it

impossible--or at least extremely difficult--to continue to subscribe to an "individual as central" explication of racism.

One additional perspective on the social implications of this study is worthy of mention. Charles V. Willie (1981), a professor at the Harvard School of Education, recently argued for the benefits of the reverse of the above-described cultural/racial characteristics of the educational environment. In an article in the Journal of Negro Education entitled "Make It Possible for Whites to Be the Minority: An Educational Goal for the Next Twenty-Five Years," Professor Willie documents the benefits which some few whites have realized from being in the "minority" in the Boston public schools. He believes that the most valuable learning that most whites have missed is that of being a minority.

> By not experiencing minority status whites have not had the opportunity to erase from their minds for all times the myth of the inherent superiority of whites, articles of faith which still persist in white dominated schools, agencies, and other institutions. We know that most whites who attend predominantly Black schools lose a sense of superiority just as many Blacks [such as those mothers in this study] who attend predominantly white schools get rid of feelings of inferiority. (p. 82)

And, as was further indicated by this study, they also come to understand the socio-cultural and ecological phenomenon of racism, and are thereby enabled to help their children to cope with it.

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